THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI VINOD KHANNA): (a) and (b) As per available information, 319 Indian fishermen and 61 fishing boats are in custody in Pakistan. They were apprehended by Pakistan Marine Security Agency during the period October, 2002 to April, 2003.

(c) Government has consistently taken up the issue of their release and repatriation with the Government of Pakistan through diplomatic channels. As a result, they have been provided consular access. Their nationality has also been confirmed. Government of Pakistan has been asked to fix an early date for their release and repatriation.

UN peace keeping forces for Iraq

502. SHRI K. RAHMAN KHAN: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that UN Secretary-General has declined to send UN peace keeping forces in Iraq;

(b) if so, what reasons have been attributed therefor;

(c) the considerations that have promoted Government to consider US request for sending Indian forces to Iraq;

(d) whether any decision has been taken in the matter; and

(e) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI VINOD KHANNA): (a) The UNSG has not been asked to send UN peace keeping forces to Iraq so far.

(b) Does not arise.

(c) to (e) Responding to an appeal contained in UN Security Council Resolution 1483 and a U.S. request, the Government considered the question of sending Indian troops to Iraq. The Government decided on July 14 as follows:-

"The Government of India has given careful thought to the question of sending Indian troops to Iraq.

Our longer term national interest, our concern for the people of Iraq, our long-standing ties with the Gulf region as a whole, as well as our growing dialogue and strengthened ties with the U.S. have been key elements in this consideration.

India remains ready to respond to the urgent needs of the Iraqi people for stability, security, political progress and economic reconstruction. Where there be an explicit UN mandate for the purpose, the Government of India could consider the deployment of our troops in Iraq.

In the meanwhile, Government of India is ready to contribute to the restoration of infrastructure, medical, health, educational, communications and other civilian needs of the Iraqi people. As a concrete gesture of our support to the Iraqi people, we are already planning to set up, jointly with Jordan, a hospital in Najaf in Iraq."

Offer of bilateral talks by Pakistan

†503. SHRIMATI SAVITA SHARDA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Pakistan has offered bilateral talks on the Kashmir issue with India by leaving its insistence of tripartite talks on the matter;

(b) if so, the details thereof; and

(c) the reaction of Government in this regard?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI VINOD KHANNA): (a) and (b) Under the Simla Agreement and as reiterated in the Lahore Declaration, both India and Pakistan are committed to addressing all bilateral issues through peaceful bilateral dialogue.

(c) A conducive environment for a sustained dialogue necessarily requires an end to cross border terrorism, and dismantling of its infrastructure in Pakistan.

Decision on sending troops to Iraq

504. SHRI NILOTPAL BASU: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

†Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.